

Proper 21 A
Exodus 17:1-7
Philippians 2:1-13
September 28, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication

Just as we develop over the course of our lifetime as individuals, the same is true for a church, or really for any organization. We don't ever stay the same; we may think we do, or that we can choose to, but it's not really possible. The question is not, "will we change?" It's, "will our change happen intentionally or by default?" In my nearly four and a half years as your pastor, we've seen a lot of progress together, and my appreciation for you and your gifts has grown and deepened. And what I'm finding happening to me is that I'm seeing a path for us coming clear as a possible next step in our life together, a direction I feel as a call upon us from God.

As a caveat, let me say this: I wouldn't necessarily call myself a visionary; I don't just automatically see out there, years down the road. Some people really have that gift, but I tell folks I'm lucky to know what I'm going to be doing next week. So when a vision does come to me, it's a sign to me that something else is going on. You may not agree with me or what I see, and that's OK. I'm just telling you the process going on inside of me, and what it means to me, upon reflection. My job is to put it out there; yours will be to decide what, if anything, to do with it.

All of our recent talk of transforming congregations has brought up the question, what is it we really think we're here for? Why, at the bottom of it all, do we do what we do as church? What is our purpose in the world, or in this community? Do we have reasons to be here past just the fact that most of us are used to going to church and

feel comfortable with it? Because those reasons of familiarity run pretty deep; some churches have run for decades just on patterns set years before. In fact, our transformation coach, who I may have mentioned is a bit of a smart aleck, told our people one time that one option for us as a congregation is to become a chapel for retired folks and other people who will fit here naturally. If that's what you want to be, he said, you can save a lot of time and energy by not worrying about new people who don't already know their way around the church.

My answer to that was, not on my watch. And I know a lot of you would say the same. This is a United Methodist Church, and to me that still means something; it represents a tradition of love for the world that combines evangelical passion for Christ and a firm commitment to a just society. But even if we weren't UM, even if we were just Christian, trying to stay static as a church, freezing a moment in time, isn't the least bit Biblical. Because God throughout the scriptures lays a call upon the faithful that has little to do with gripping tightly what has been or what feels good.

There is no doubt that God promises us good things, abundant life; God calls people of faith over and over to journey to a land of promise, where milk and honey flow, and the ground is fruitful, where all we need will be provided. But the kicker is that I'm not sure there's a direct, non-stop ticket that we can buy to get there. Maybe there is for some. But the rest of us are going to hit gullies and deserts and strange corners along the way. God's going to call us to travel through places where we might not want to be, like into the wilderness, where there's nothing to eat or drink but what God provides every day. It's a safe bet that if we follow God and God's Holy Child, we

will find ourselves bumped out of our own driver's seat, wishing Jesus would get a GPS. TV preachers may tell us otherwise, but God's goal in our journey together, according to the scriptures, is not to make us comfortable and then let us be. God is going to take care of us, sometimes in spectacular ways, but it won't be according to our map or timeline.

So where, then, might God be leading us? I'll tell you what I see coming down the pike as I pray about this church and as I hear all these amazing stories of ministry springing up, the ones we'll be celebrating during this stewardship campaign. I see three strands of our congregational identity weaving together in the future.

First is the fact that this is a very diverse congregation. Some of you know much better than I that a whole spectrum of political and religious understandings is represented here. We humans like homogeneous groups where we can feel comfortable (there's that word again). But there are some Sunday School classes here that may look homogeneous but actually hold a very lively, ongoing debate with each other. Some of us believe fundamentally differently from each other. Yet this church is as good as any I've ever seen at making room for all of that. Sometimes we do that by just avoiding topics we know we would disagree on. But you're also willing to be big enough people to know that there is a core to a person, God's image buried in each of us. And that divine image in me will seek out the divine image in you, if we'll both get out of the way.

And that's really the second strand of identity: there is great love here. It is easy to be superficial at church. We don't do it intentionally; often we just aren't

plugged into ways to really connect, to let the Christ in me meet the Christ in you. That connection was the point of last week's women's retreat and of Emmaus retreats and reunion groups. It's the point of Bible studies and mission projects and Sunday School. And you know, it's even just little things—like when we pass the peace of Christ at the beginning of the service, it isn't just to say hi and be friendly, though it is also that. It is to look into each other's eyes as people in whom Jesus dwells. It's to seek in what really could be a superficial moment, a heart connection with each other instead. It's a holy thing to do. Even if you and your neighbor down the pew do cancel each other out at the voting booth every year, I have found by watching you that it is love, the love of Christ, that binds you together and unifies you as a body.

These two strands of our identity, diversity and the love of Christ, echo the beautiful picture we find painted in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul is trying to keep the church at Philippi united; there were false teachers trying to distract them from reliance on the grace of God alone. So he begs them, "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." (2:2, 5) Now, that little line may or may not be familiar to you, but it is deceptively potent in its meaning. In using the word, "mind," Paul doesn't mean just the place at the top of the head, where people do their rational thinking. The Greek and Roman understanding of the mind was more what we mean by heart or soul, really the seat of a person's identity, the core place that empowers both decision and action, the place that orients who a person is.

So think about that—can you imagine? The core of who Christ was, the place in

him where decisions came from, the seat of his actions—that mind, being in our mind? Could such a thing be possible, that Christ might think and act and decide through us? It is hard to believe, but this kind of presence of Christ in us is exactly what Paul claims is the point of the community of faith. This is the goal of the church. For when Paul says, “let this mind be in you,” the “you” is plural. The mind of Christ is to fill our common mind, our common life and priorities. We as a community have to make it our priority to allow who he was and is guide who we are.

And if we look to this letter to see who Christ is, according to Paul, the word that strikes me most is one that we don’t have in English, so seminary students all learn it in the Greek: *kenosis*, which means self-emptying. It is Christ’s act of emptying himself of power and right that ends in his exultation, his reunion with God. And I believe this same *kenosis* is what we’re supposed to let ourselves be filled with and shaped by. As a people who strive to bear the mind of Christ, our communal life should be poured out, freely. It should have a quality of movement, of change, and of giving—risking, even—what rightly belongs to us, for the sake of love.

All of that leads to what I see as the third strand of our identity as a church, which is a public recognition of God’s purpose for us here in the community of Wimberley. This town is growing, and in it we see a larger version of our own congregational diversity. Spiritually it includes everyone from new age earthy-crunchies to traditional Bible-believers and all sorts of combinations in between. I think there are churches in this town that are generally covering the two ends of that spectrum. But in the middle, where things are not black and white, where they are

perhaps more confusing or complex, there is most definitely still room in Wimberley for a church that says, “regardless, everyone is welcome here.” So that claim would become the third facet of our identity. 1) We are a diverse body; 2) we love each other with the boundary-bridging, unifying love of Christ; and 3) we believe that God has made us and put us where we are for a reason—to pour us out into the world as a place of welcome for those who need a place to belong, and as a word of grace and peace with people who live in need of grace and peace.

The vision I see is this congregation just taking the next step into the future, and claiming intentionally and out loud what already is. It’s to look around and see what God has done and is doing in our lives and to assume that this is not the last chapter of this church’s life, but only the most recent. The vision is to let God transform us, not into a church that we don’t recognize, where we don’t get to fit anymore. The vision is our letting God transform us so that what is already an inclusive, loving church, already actively involved in the community, seeks new ways to be a blessing to this community, so that our outward focus becomes just as much a part of who we say we are as is our welcoming, loving nature.

When we come to you with a stewardship campaign, this is why. I believe God is stirring this place up, calling us to take church to the next level, calling us to discipleship that demands something significant of us in a new way—not just our money, but ourselves, our faith, our vision. Paul tells us that it is God who is working in us, allowing us to will and to work for God’s good pleasure. Thanks be to God for making us who we are and who we will be and for giving us purpose for our lives.